As MIT student authored an anti-arson bill that was signed into Massachusetts law last month as part of an Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP) project.

Kenneth Sparks '86 authored the bill, designed to reduce arson-related crimes from buying tax-title-closed property. The bill applies the same restrictions to tax delinquents, even those with no record of arson or arson-related crimes, to buy government property, Vellucci said. Such delinquents must pay their back taxes before the state will allow them to purchase the cheap real estate, he added.

"The MIT campus is in my district and my legislative assistant Clifford Truesdell was formerly a UROP assistant director. We get in touch with UROP, and they found and then helped fund Ken Sparks," Vellucci said.

Sparks started the package of four anti-arson bills during the first semester of his sophomore year in a UROP which was funded by the Massachusetts Small Business Development Center and the Massachusetts Technology Dartmouth. He got in touch with UROP, and they found and then helped fund Ken Sparks," Vellucci said.

Sparks finished the bills as an employee of Vellucci. He also authored two lie-detector bills for the representative. Most of the bills were completed in 1984, and all were filed in 1985. Sparks spent five to 15 hours a week on his project during his semester of UROP and continued at four to five hours a week after that. He worked independently on the whole, carrying out his research at MIT and State House libraries and writing the bills himself.

Of the five bills that have not been passed, Vellucci will refile three. Two others, however, were dropped because their goals already had been or will be accomplished, Sparks said.

Arsenists purchase inexpensive property and buildings that have been seized by a city or town for delinquent taxes, Vellucci said. They then heavily insure the buildings and later burn them down to collect the insurance, he said.

Real estate developers sometimes commit arson to clear out tenants with long leases in order to re-develop the area into a more expensive one, Vellucci continued. To maximize their profit, the arsonists often do not pay taxes on the property, he said.

The railed bill, Chapter 800, is titled "An Act Establishing a Disqualification System for the Sale of Certain City and Town Properties." It cuts down the profits of arsonists by eliminating one of their major means of acquiring cheap property.

The bill prevents anyone who has been convicted of "willful and malicious setting of a fire or of a crime involving the aiding, counseling or procuring of a willful and malicious setting of a fire, or of a crime involving the fraudulent filing of a claim for fire insurance; or [who] is delinquent in the payment of real estate taxes to the city or town in which the property is being sold" property to arsonists.

The act will also enhance tax revenues because it forbids tax-title-closed property. The bill prevents anyone who has been convicted of "willful and malicious setting of a fire or of a crime involving the aiding, counseling or procuring of a willful and malicious setting of a fire, or of a crime involving the fraudulent filing of a claim for fire insurance; or [who] is delinquent in the payment of real estate taxes to the city or town in which the property is being sold" property to arsonists.

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